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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON NIGERIA'S ELECTION PREPARATIONS

Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Nigeria's political space has opened significantly since the defeat of the third term proposal in May. There are now over 40 registered parties and many potential candidates are testing the waters. However, the political scene remains chaotic with a shifting constellation of parties mostly formed around personalities rather than policy positions. In addition, serious concerns remain about Nigeria's technical preparedness to hold credible, free and fair elections in just 8 months. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has not yet published the election timetable and its plans for voter registration are problematic. INEC's Chairman Maurice Iwu was hostile toward U.S.-sponsored democracy NGOs in a recent meeting. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On August 3, the embassy's Election Partners Team met to discuss preparations by the GON for elections in April 2007. Participants included the Ambassador, Poloffs, A/DCM, and representatives of USAID, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and IFES, an elections NGO. The group discussed the activities of candidates and parties as well as INEC's preparations for Nigeria's local, state, and national elections scheduled for April 2007.

Parties, Candidates, Conventions

¶3. (U) IRI reported that over 40 political parties have now been registered by INEC and may field candidates in 2007. Most parties are not forming to allow groups of people to express political platforms; rather, they are being used as personal vehicles for big men to further their political ambitions. Some of the parties are merely a back-up on which to run in the event their preferred party does not select them. The political landscape will become clearer after the major party conventions are held. None of the parties have announced their convention dates, and no party wants to hold its convention too early and watch losing primary candidates decamp (along with their supporters) to other tickets. Parties must identify their candidates to INEC 150 days prior to the election, so IRI expects that most conventions will be held in November.

Election calendar still uncertain

¶4. (C) Though INEC has announced that the 2007 elections will take place between April 8 and April 29, it has yet to publish the full election timetable, which will specify on

exactly which dates various elections will be held. In addition to the presidential contest, Nigerians will vote for governors, national assembly representatives, and state houses of assembly representatives. By law INEC must publish the election timetable at least 150 days prior to the voting, and IFES expects that INEC will wait until the statutory deadline to do so.

Voter Registration: Last Minute and Overly Ambitious

¶5. (C) INEC is now planning to register voters through the "direct data capture" method. Each voter will personally appear for registration at his polling place. His name will be entered into a computer and a digital photo and fingerprint will be captured. This high-tech method would probably result in a more accurate and more secure voter's roll than in previous elections. However, INEC has not yet purchased any of the equipment needed to implement direct data capture. They have not even chosen a supplier, and it is not clear how long it will take to order and receive the necessary machines. Recent newspaper articles question whether INEC has the funds necessary to purchase this equipment. Even if the machines can be sourced and paid for on time, according to IFES, training and installation will take some time. Nigeria has 120,000 announced polling places at which voter registration must be conducted, but INEC is only planning to purchase 40,000 machines. This would force registration to be conducted on a rolling schedule in different parts of the country, with the consequent logistical challenges.

¶6. (C) Because of the change to a direct data capture

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method, INEC now tells IFES that they will not begin the voter registration exercise until late October or early November. However, by law they must complete the registration 120 days prior to the election (early December). This leaves a very short window for INEC to register millions of citizens at 120,000 polling places. At least one of INEC's National Commissioners remarked to the IFES Director that INEC's voter registration scheme is likely to fail and that "Plan B" will be to simply use the (flawed) 2003 voters roll as a base and make a modest attempt to update it.

Iwu Lashes Out

¶7. (C) INEC Chairman Maurice Iwu met with IRI, NDI, and IFES on July 31. Iwu appeared stressed and was in a bad mood. The NGO representatives reported that Iwu is increasingly trying to monitor and/or control their activities in Nigeria.

Iwu is now asking for monthly meetings with all three organizations and told them he feels that the European Union and United Nations are "more transparent" than the U.S. team about their election activities. He insisted that NDI must use INEC-supplied materials for voter education and was dismissive of IRI's efforts to facilitate a political party "code of conduct," because INEC already published a code of conduct for parties in 2003. Under IRI's leadership, Nigerian parties have voluntarily come together and written a code of conduct for the 2007 election. This type of bottom-up, party driven effort is often more effective than a code imposed by the government.

¶8. (C) More disturbing however was Iwu's insistence that IFES cancel a seminar on electoral violence scheduled for August 1. The meeting was a follow-on to a conference IFES sponsored in July on the same topic, which brought together civil society, party representatives, and government

officials (including INEC). Chairman Iwu reported told IFES-Nigeria's director that he must cancel the seminar due to "issues of national security." When the director attempted to persuade Iwu the seminar should take place, Iwu threatened "I know where your meeting is taking place." IFES prudently decided to postpone its election violence seminar, rather than risk the meeting's interruption by Nigerian security services.

Comment

19. (C) It is encouraging that the political space has opened and that parties and candidates are multiplying. Post remains concerned that the election timetable hasn't been announced, party conventions are likely to be held at the last possible moment, and it will be extremely difficult for Nigeria to register voters in a timely manner using direct data capture. By late November or early December, we should know whether the GON can meet their legal deadlines for election preparation. Diplomatic chatter that President Obasanjo wants to extend his time in office continues, and inadequate election preparation might allow him a scenario for so doing. We are concerned about increasing political violence as Nigeria attempts to complete their first transfer of power from civilian to civilian. The embassy will continue working aggressively to encourage Nigerian elections that are significantly better than in 2003, but there are many potential pitfalls in the road ahead.
CAMPBELL